

THE LAST ORACLE



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Sam Jardine Crime Thrillers, Book 3

Christopher Hepworth

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CHAPTER 1

Luxor, Egypt, 12th September 1997

The Egyptologist applied a cool, damp cloth to the fevered brow of her twelve-year-old daughter. There had been an outbreak of malaria in the busy city of Luxor and many children had died from the mosquito-borne disease. Saara gazed at her beautiful daughter and fretted she had left her telephone call to the doctor too late.

There was no denying Sienna was different from other children, even allowing for her mixed-race bloodlines. She was beautiful beyond imagination and taller than the other children in her classroom. Sienna was academically gifted to the point of brilliance, but her mother worried about her social development. Her daughter was remote with other children and possessed an extraordinary spiritual awareness that unnerved those around her. The local imam had suggested sending Sienna to the Luxor Al-Azhar school, where she would receive a strict religious education, but on her mediocre government wage, Saara would struggle to afford the fees.

Saara had often considered writing to the wealthy American, Rex Daingerfield, to let him know he had a daughter, and only Allah knew how much she needed the money. But she feared the handsome American oil tycoon with his sophisticated Western ways would take Sienna out of Egypt, leaving Saara with nothing but her memories.

Sienna trembled with fever and Saara wondered why the doctor was taking so long to arrive. At last she heard a banging on the door. Saara placed the damp cloth back in the bowl of water and rushed to let the doctor in. She slid the chain off its latch and unlocked the door.

‘She’s through here in the lounge. I should have called you earlier but—’

Saara reeled from the blow delivered across her face and fell to the floor. The man who entered was tall and thin with a shaved head, and stared at her with grey, fanatical eyes. He was dressed in religious attire, but it was obvious he was not an imam – nor was he a doctor. He was no more than thirty years old, and wore a long white robe decorated with symbols from the old religion. Two other men rushed past the priest and into the lounge of her little house. Saara screamed as she realised the intruders were intent on abducting her daughter.

‘She’s sick. She will die if she doesn’t see a doctor soon. You can’t take her!’

The priest hit Saara on the side of the head once more and strode into the lounge. He pulled a small green glass vial from under his robe and crouched next to the threadbare sofa Sienna lay upon.

‘So pretty,’ he mumbled in a strange foreign accent as he ran his fingers along Sienna’s cheeks.

‘No!’ screamed Saara. ‘Leave her alone.’

The priest lifted Sienna’s head and made her drink from the green vial, causing her to gag at the foul taste.

‘Silence the mother,’ commanded the priest.

The two attendants grabbed Saara, pulled her head backward and forced a similar bottle to her lips, pouring its contents down her throat. They covered her mouth until she had swallowed the cloudy liquid, then gripped her head until she lost consciousness. After laying her on the floor, they turned their attention to Sienna. She was gently lifted from the shabby sofa and carried out to a battered old Toyota Cressida waiting in the street outside.

* * *

Sienna was led into a vast underground cavern that resembled a natural cathedral. Light shone from a skylight that had been cut through several metres of solid mountain rock. In the centre of the cavern was a crystal-clear pool fed from an underground spring. The cavern had been formed millions of years before from an immense hollow within a natural rock formation. Colourful stalactites hung from the roof twelve metres above her head, like grotesque organ pipes. At the far end of a large, open concourse, four massive granite columns rose from floor to roof and beyond them was a doorway surrounded by large stone lintels. Two massive oak doors separated the large underground cavern from the hand-cut tombs, chambers and passageways, which she would come to know as the temple’s inner sanctum. Sienna stood transfixed at the sight of the gilded painting that decorated the oak doors. She recognised the image from her history books as the portrait of the brutal ancient Egyptian goddess, Sekhmet the Avenger.

Sienna trembled, but not from the after-effects of malaria. She knew she had been cured of the disease by the mysterious priests. She had read stories about the ancient goddess who had almost wiped out humanity at the dawn of civilisation with her bloodlust and violent rages. She

trembled because she knew once she stepped through the double oak doors, there would be no return to the simple life she had left behind in Luxor.

Sienna stared at the painting and wondered how a goddess could look so terrifying, her blood-stained sword in one hand and a severed human head in the other, and yet so majestic. Sekhmet's green eyes blazed and her features reminded Sienna of a powerful lioness that would kill at the slightest provocation. The two priests who had guided Sienna to the cavern opened the huge oak doors and stood aside.

Sienna walked through the doorway with trepidation and into the dim passage beyond. It took a minute for her eyes to adjust to the gloom. As the passageway sloped downwards, the temperature dropped several degrees and Sienna had to walk carefully on the slippery sandstone floor. After several minutes of walking, the passageway widened and Sienna found herself in the temple's antechamber. At the back of the cave-like room, a shrivelled creature that looked like an abandoned corpse sat on a low stool surrounded by furs and animal skins. A few strands of long grey hair clung to her thin scalp and her rheumy eyes stared at Sienna. The creature stretched out a skinny claw and beckoned Sienna to come closer.

'Kneel before me child, so I can see you better,' the toothless old crone said in a husky voice.

Sienna hesitated, but approached and knelt on the furs at the woman's gnarled feet, noticing a smell of decay masked by the sweet aroma of frankincense. Sienna flinched as the woman ran her bony fingers down Sienna's immaculately painted face and clutched at the gossamer-thin cotton of her simple white gown.

'Extraordinary,' croaked the ancient oracle. 'So beautiful, and yet so similar in appearance to the image of our goddess.'

'I'm frightened, my lady.'

'I will take good care of you, my dear. You have received the calling and great responsibilities await you. The future of our religion and the destiny of the world is in your hands now.'

'But I'm a good Muslim, my lady. And I don't trust the priests. They look at me like hungry jackals around a helpless lamb.'

The hag cackled and gripped Sienna's arm. Her touch was cold and leathery. 'It is true you cannot trust the priests. They have corrupted our religion in the name of greed and power.'

'Then why don't you fight them? You have the power of the Oracle and your goddess cannot

be summoned unless it is through your invocations.’

‘Sekhmet is *your* goddess now, my child,’ said the Oracle. She ran her skeletal fingers through Sienna’s lustrous black hair. ‘I cannot fight the priests because I am old and infirm. In the little time I have left, my duty is to pass the secrets of the Oracle to you. Then the fight against the priests will be yours.’

‘I don’t think I *can* fight them, my lady.’

The old woman gripped Sienna’s hand with surprising strength. ‘I once knelt before the old oracle as a frightened child too. I did not possess even half the spiritual qualities or the natural gifts you have. It is time for you to become a woman and lead the fight against those who would usurp our religion and do harm to the earth.’

A tear rolled down Sienna’s cheek, smudging her elaborate Egyptian make-up. The Oracle took Sienna’s shoulders and pulled her close to her shrivelled bosom.

‘It is now time for you to meet the goddess. She will be terrifying to behold and will reach deep into your soul and your mind. But do not be afraid, for I am here to protect you.’

Sienna felt the temperature drop as a freezing mist rolled through the inner sanctum. Her eyes widened with terror as a dark shadow loomed over them.

CHAPTER 2

Luangwa Valley, Zambia, Twenty years later

‘There’s no better place than this desolate African wilderness to send a man to an early grave, Chuck. Ain’t nobody gonna find his stinkin’ carcass till it’s been picked over by vultures and hyenas for months. Just give me the word and I swear he’s a goner.’

‘Easy, Dan. For some reason I can’t fathom, Rex Daingerfield’s got a soft spot for this kid and he wants the negotiation done by the book.’

The two American oilmen squinted into the blazing African sun as they searched the sky for the approaching Gulfstream G550. They felt the oppressive humidity weigh on their shoulders like a heavy blanket, and dark patches of sweat stained the armpits of their khaki shirts. Emblazoned on their shirt sleeves was the howling timber wolf logo of the Daingerfield Oil Company.

Nearby, Thornicroft giraffe grazed on the succulent leaves of acacia trees that flanked the grass runway. Their heads turned on their long necks towards the sound of the approaching corporate jet, and they cantered to the safety of the thick bush, long legs ambling with graceful precision.

‘So why the hell did this head office desk jockey call a halt to our drilling activity just as we were about to frack?’ said Dan Elrod, the taller of the two Americans. ‘The delay cost me a fifty-grand production bonus and my crew are mutinous.’

Chuck Crawford removed his Ray-Ban sunglasses and cleaned the lenses on his shirt before turning to his colleague. ‘Sam Jardine’s a hot-shot negotiator and he persuaded Rex Daingerfield that he could talk crazy Chief Kincofu into signing the drilling permit when no-one else could. I’ll deal with him in the usual way when the contract’s signed.’

Elrod chuckled as he scratched at his greying beard. The Texan chief engineer knew his boss had a track record of destroying the careers and reputations of all head office managers who stood in the way of his production targets with ruthless efficiency.

Crawford, Daingerfield’s global operations manager, had been sent to rescue the disastrous Luangwa Valley fracking well, which had been beset by quality control problems. His features were weather-worn but handsome, and his powerful physique was toned by decades of hauling

heavy drilling equipment around the oil rigs of the world. He had a reputation for hard work and straight talking, and was Daingerfield's go-to man in times of crisis. He had spent twenty years as a wildcatter drilling for oil and gas in the shale rocks of North Dakota before rising through the ranks of his new employer.

'So how come this guy Sam Jardine has the authority to stop the frack in the first place?' asked Elrod. 'He don't know jack shit about the oil industry.' He swatted an inch-long tsetse fly that had landed on his ankle. 'Goddam evil critters' got a bite like a mule!' The dead tsetse crackled like a dried twig as he squashed it between his forefinger and thumb.

Crawford watched as the white Gulfstream executed a perfect landing on the short, grass runway. As the plane taxied to a halt, the whining pitch of the twin engines dropped in tone and then silence returned to the African bush.

'By Zambian tradition, the tribal chief still has to ratify the exploration permit, even though the government's already sanctioned the project. Jardine said it might cause legal problems down the track if we don't strike a deal with the chief.'

'So who screwed up?' The lanky chief engineer slapped his limbs in frustration as three more tsetse flies landed on his legs. 'We've already drilled the test well and there's fifty million bucks' worth of drilling equipment, chemicals and pipeline in Lusaka ready for the frack.'

'Chief Kincofu's son Martin Kincofu is a lawyer and is threatening legal action unless local tradition is respected. Turns out young Kincofu is an environmentalist.'

Dan Elrod spat his chewing gum into the dirt by the wheels of the battered old LandCruiser to display his disgust at the environmentalist lobby. 'Goddamn greenies,' he muttered.

'Chief Kincofu's son is claiming the Luangwa Valley ecosystem is too sensitive to support the drilling of eighty gas wells.'

'Bullshit!' said Elrod. 'This place is perfect for fracking. Ain't no humans for hundreds of miles. Just a few scrawny hogs and apes.'

The two men watched as Sam Jardine emerged from the Gulfstream, blinked in the harsh African sun and pulled a pair of Aviator sunglasses from the top pocket of his jacket.

'This kid looks like he ain't never set foot outside of the office. I'll give him two days in the African bush before he starts crying for his silk pyjamas,' said Elrod, placing another stick of gum in his mouth.

Crawford raised his binoculars and studied the lean six-foot frame of Sam Jardine as he

walked down the steps of the jet. The negotiator looked much younger than Crawford had expected, with thick, sandy-coloured hair and craggy Viking features. *Mid-thirties*, Crawford reckoned. Sam broke into an easy smile when he spotted the two Americans, then looked around the airstrip with an air of innocence that belied his reputation as a tough negotiator.

‘Did they send us the right guy?’ said Crawford. He put down his binoculars and jumped into the LandCruiser. ‘I guess we’ll have to work with what we’ve got. Okay Dan, let’s collect him and take him to the camp.’

* * *

‘This whole place stinks of methane gas,’ Sam complained to the operations manager and his chief engineer as they drove into the Luangwa bush camp. ‘Is the well leaking?’

‘With all due respect, sir, this is a fracking site,’ Crawford explained to Jardine as he parked the LandCruiser in front of one of the whitewashed chalets that ringed the main lodge of Zambia’s foremost national park. ‘You would expect to detect a trace of methane in the air.’

‘This is a wildlife park, not a fracking site, Mr Crawford. It’s home to the most valuable concentration of wildlife in Africa. The Zambian government has allowed us to drill for gas on condition we do not disturb the fragile ecosystem. The success of our negotiations depends on us remembering those principles.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Crawford replied.

Elrod was not so diplomatic. ‘How long you been in the oil industry, boy? This ain’t the freakin’ Chelsea flower show, you know.’

Sam ignored Elrod, opened the rear door of the LandCruiser and stepped out to view the long bend of the Luangwa River. It was late in the season and the river had shrunk to a quarter of its usual volume. A bull hippopotamus grunted its distinctive challenge to the arriving humans. Sam watched as a family of vervet monkeys screamed from the branches of an overhanging acacia tree.

He turned to look at the magnificent barn-like structure of the Luangwa Lodge. Its huge thatched roof blended in with the adjacent bush, and large supporting columns soared from the ground to give the impression of a floating roof. The lodge was designed to take advantage of the magnificent river views that teemed with wildlife. A breeze circulated through the large building

and cooled the guests as they relaxed around the bar after returning from their afternoon safaris.

Elrod moved close to Sam as they carried his luggage to the chalet. ‘Better watch your back, boy,’ he muttered menacingly. ‘The African bush ain’t a friendly place for a city slicker.’

Sam plucked a tsetse fly that had landed on the howling wolf logo of Elrod’s shirt sleeve. He held it towards Elrod and crunched it between his fingers.

‘It appears that the Luangwa Valley is fighting back against the intrusion of the oil industry, Mr Elrod. It’s not just me who will have to watch his back.’

* * *

‘Welcome to the Luangwa test well, ladies and gentlemen,’ said Crawford as he escorted his guests around the proposed drilling site. Crawford had the calm authority of a man who was on top of his game. ‘Every modern safety feature has been shipped over from Houston and incorporated into the well. You can rest assured it conforms to the highest standards in the world and the protection of the local environment is guaranteed.’

Sam looked at the chief of the Ngoma people and his small entourage, who were dressed in traditional Zambian clothing but wore Daingerfield hard hats on their heads. They gaped at the four-storey fracking rig that rose from the ground like a mini Eiffel Tower. Chief Kincofu was in his late sixties. Despite his senior rank, he was impoverished and in poor health. His toes poked through the holes of his ancient lace-up shoes and his multicoloured tee-shirt was frayed. He was illiterate, and dependent upon the local alcoholic brew known as *kachasu*. In contrast, his lawyer son was proud, urbane and intelligent. Martin steered his unsteady father through the tangle of fracking trucks and pipes that surrounded the rig.

‘The Luangwa well is half a mile deep and encased in stainless-steel piping over an inch thick,’ Crawford explained to the chief’s entourage. ‘The steel is locked in place by the finest concrete in the world. It’s impossible for any chemicals to leak from the well into the river.’

Sam stared at an empty Pamodzi Cement Company bag that had blown towards them, and frowned as he noticed the expiry date for the cement was almost overdue.

‘What about the noise?’ asked Martin Kincofu. ‘I’ve heard the fracking process sounds like thunder. Won’t it scare off the animals and annoy the tourists?’

‘That’s why we have built this brushwood fence around the base of the rig.’ Crawford

indicated the two metre fence made in the local Zambian style. ‘We estimate it will absorb sixty per cent of the noise and will blend in with its bush environment. The guests staying at the lodge over there,’ he pointed to the distant Luangwa lodge, ‘will only hear a muffled rumble during the fracking process.’

‘How long will each frack take?’ asked a reporter from the *Times of Zambia*, pushing his wire-framed glasses up the bridge of his nose.

‘About three days. Once the shale has been fractured, the process for extracting gas is not intrusive.’

‘It smells terrible,’ complained an overweight Zambian lady swathed in a colourful cloth dress. She held her nose with her thumb and forefinger to emphasise her point.

‘Each of our wells leak less methane per day than the average herd of cows. But we must face the facts. The world is running short of fossil fuels and there will be a twenty-year gap before the renewable energy sector can generate enough capacity to replace oil and gas. The Luangwa Shale contains enough gas to supply Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Malawi until solar and wind power become an economic reality in this region.’ He looked at Chief Kincofu. ‘And this gas field will make the traditional landowners wealthy beyond their wildest dreams.’

‘I hear the fracking process uses plenty water,’ said the reporter. ‘*Plenty* water,’ he added for emphasis.

‘The fracking process will use about a million gallons of river water per frack. But we will be able to recover at least half of that water for use in other wells when they come on stream.’

Sam looked at the distant river. The rains were due next month but the mighty Luangwa looked shrunken and lethargic. The numerous hippos in the river were struggling for room. A cranky hippo bellowed at a five-metre crocodile that had swum too close. The banks of the river were teeming with wildlife as all other sources of water in the game park had dried out weeks ago. The land was parched. If the rains did not come, it would spell disaster for the valley.

‘What about the chemicals?’ said Martin Kincofu, pointing at the thirty trucks that surrounded the well head.

‘You will be pleased to know Zambia has some of the most stringent environmental laws in the world,’ said Crawford. ‘We use the minimum of chemicals required to complete the job.’

‘What is the purpose of the chemicals?’ Martin Kincofu persisted.

‘Over ninety-nine per cent of the fracking fluid is pure water and sand. The chemicals we add

are needed to reduce friction, prevent corrosion and kill off bacteria. They are the same chemicals you will find in your family home. There is nothing hazardous about the fracking process.'

'Thank you, Mr Crawford. I think we have seen enough,' said Martin Kincofu.

'In which case, we will return to the lodge,' Crawford said to the assembled guests, 'where my colleague Sam Jardine will talk you through the legal formalities.'

CHAPTER 3

Dressed in his traditional tribal regalia, old Chief Kincofu shuffled his way towards the conference room of the Luangwa lodge in the stifling late afternoon sun. He paused at the doorway and blessed the empty chairs that surrounded the long wooden table in the middle of the room by shaking his multicoloured handkerchief at each chair. Following the chief into the conference room were Sam, Crawford, Elrod, and the chief's son, Martin. Above their heads, ceiling fans whirred in a losing battle to stir the oppressive heat. The sliding doors and windows were wide open, giving the visitors a panoramic view of the long bend in the Luangwa River. The banks of the lethargic river teemed with birds and wildlife, eager to slake their thirst in the intense African sun.

Chief Kincofu and Martin chatted near the long wooden table, while Sam, Crawford and Elrod stared through the open window at the animals basking near the river.

'Chief Kincofu is a wily old fox, Sam,' Crawford warned. 'I've met him at least three times in the last two months and he's never responded to any of my questions. He just sits there with a knowing smile on his face. I don't get what he's up to.'

'I'm sure we'll find out soon enough,' Sam responded, looking over at the old man as his son guided him towards his seat.

'He's crazy as a cut snake,' Elrod whispered in Sam's ear. 'Are you sure you've got the balls for this negotiation, boy?'

Sam ignored Elrod and wandered over to help the chief. He smiled respectfully at the old man and used an expression he had learned in the Ngoma phrase book he had bought in preparation for his trip. '*Ndakondwa kukumana nanu. Muli bwanji?*' Sam said; he was pleased to meet the chief and hoped he was in good health.

'*Bueno. Bwanji?*' the chief replied. He held out a hand, which Sam clasped in the traditional Zambian manner.

'*Bueno!*' responded Sam; Good. He pulled the old man's chair out from the table while Martin Kincofu assisted him to a sitting position.

'*Zikomo,*' uttered the chief, thanking Sam for his help.

Sam walked back around the table and took his seat opposite the chief while Crawford and Elrod sat either side of Sam.

‘Where d’you learn to speak like that?’ Elrod whispered at Sam.

‘It never hurts to memorise a few local phrases on the long flight from London,’ Sam replied.

They were interrupted by Martin Kincofu. ‘My father thanks you for your thoughtfulness, Mr Jardine, but regrets he will not sign the drilling permit. The Luangwa Valley is one of the most sensitive ecosystems on the planet and a haven for many of the world’s most endangered species.’

Elrod leaned across the table to confront the lawyer, but Sam laid a hand on the oilman’s shoulder.

‘We share your father’s love for the Luangwa Valley and wouldn’t be here if we thought there would be any risk to the ecosystem,’ Sam said. ‘There is much unjustified hysteria that surrounds our industry, but we hope by the end of this meeting we will have convinced your father of the truth.’

‘My father says he has lost faith in the integrity of your company due to the deceitful actions of the men who sit beside you. He doubts you can undo the damage.’

‘My reading of the situation before I came here was that your father would need a major show of faith from Daingerfield Oil to rebuild that trust. I convinced the company’s owner, Rex Daingerfield, to add an additional five million dollars of safety features into the construction of the Luangwa wells. This would allow us to fit a second casing of thick steel inside the well and double the surrounding cement. We are keen to make the Luangwa well the environmental model for the rest of the fracking industry to follow.’

Martin Kincofu translated Sam’s words to his father. Sam noticed his tone had become more conciliatory and he waited as a long discussion took place between father and son. The old chief looked at Sam as if trying to gauge his measure as a man of honour. Eventually, Martin turned back to Sam.

‘My father asks what will happen when the underground rock is broken? Will not the mighty Luangwa be swallowed by the earth? How will the elephants drink when the river has gone?’

‘Please tell your father the mighty Luangwa River is safe. The cracking takes place in a layer of rock far beneath the surface. On top of that layer of broken shale is a second layer of rock that is as hard as iron and has separated the gas from the river for millions of years. There have been over one million fracks around the world during the last twenty years and the rivers of the world are still as safe and clean as ever.’

‘Then why does the well smell of rotten eggs?’

‘There will be some leakage of methane from the well itself and from the fracking fluid when it returns back up the steel pipes. But once we start full production we can capture that methane and use it to power the lodge and surrounding villages—’

Crawford interrupted Sam. ‘We weren’t planning on doing that, Mr Jardine. It would add thousands of dollars a day to the site’s operating costs.’

‘We are now, Mr Crawford. I phoned Rex last night and he has agreed. As Mr Kincofu pointed out, the level of methane leakage here is unacceptable.’

‘What you say is reassuring,’ said Martin. ‘But you don’t understand the distress the drilling will have on the traditional owners of the land.’

‘Aren’t we discussing those implications with your father right now?’ Sam asked.

Kincofu looked at his watch. ‘Perhaps if you would turn your chair around and look towards the main entrance of the building. The traditional owners should be checking in about now.’

Sam glanced through the open walls towards the main entrance of the lodge. Two large terracotta pillars supported a framework of black wooden beams that in turn held the impressive thatched roof six metres above their heads. Inside the building, to the right of the entrance steps was a long, curved reception desk. Five vibrant watercolours painted by a local artist hung on the wall opposite the reception desk. A cheerful receptionist was checking in a family of South African tourists.

‘Are we ready to sign the drilling permit yet?’ Elrod said. ‘I have thirty highly paid engineers sitting on their backsides waiting for the first frack.’

‘The traditional owners are approaching the entrance now,’ Martin Kincofu said, ignoring the American chief engineer.

Sam looked at the old chief, whose eyes had closed and his head was nodding. Suddenly the old man sat bolt upright in his seat and he became energised and excited. ‘*Mehlo Madala*,’ he said to himself.

‘What’s the old guy saying?’ Crawford whispered in Sam’s ear.

Sam shrugged but Martin overheard. ‘It’s an old Ngoma expression. Roughly translated, it means “welcome back, old friend”.’

‘Don’t tell me the cunning old fox has brought in another lawyer.’ Crawford sighed with exasperation.

The conversation was cut short by a low rumble that vibrated through the whole building. The orange juice in the jug on the table rippled as a large elephant climbed the steps of the entrance to the lodge. She weighed over six tonnes and stood over four metres at the shoulder. Her head was weighed down by a pair of colossal, yellowing tusks, each the length of a grown man. Behind the old matriarch was a herd of two dozen elephants, including five juveniles. There was a spring in the step of the entire herd as they anticipated the treats that they had travelled so far to enjoy. The South African tourists rushed behind the large marble reception desk to avoid being crushed by the giant mammals. An inquisitive juvenile seized a ripe apple from the reception fruit bowl with its long trunk and placed it into its cavernous mouth. A small calf stumbled on the steps leading to the reception and was nudged up the remaining steps by its protective mother.

As the matriarch lumbered past the entrance to the dining room, she swung her massive head towards the five men in the conference room. The mighty animal's tiny eyes peered at Sam. After what seemed like an eternity, the old elephant looked away and continued her journey towards the back entrance of the lodge. Sam shuddered, feeling as though the elephant had judged his soul and found him wanting. He watched in awe as the herd filed through the reception towards the rear entrance of the lodge. Cameras clicked in a frenzy of activity until the last of the elephants exited the lodge, making their way past the swimming pool and into the tinder-dry bush beyond.

'That old monster looked me straight in the eye,' complained Elrod, 'and told me it would trample on my grave within a year.'

Crawford shook his head in despair at his melodramatic colleague.

'The elephants are the traditional owners?' Sam asked Martin Kincofu.

'They come here each year to feast on the ripe mangoes in the bush. The lodge was built on the track that leads to their favourite food source. They do not feel it is necessary to go around the lodge, and who is going to stop them?'

'Look that was impressive, Mr Kincofu, but can we get back to the drilling permit? Is the chief ready to sign or not?' Crawford drummed his pen on the table and looked at Sam, imploring him to re-commence the negotiation.

'Except there are no mangos this year,' said Martin Kincofu, ignoring Crawford.

'No mangos? What happened?' asked Sam.

The old chief stuck out a bony index finger towards Elrod and spoke in his native Ngoma language. *'Ndi chitsiru sanamvere.'*

'What the hell is he saying?' demanded Elrod, unnerved by the recent turn of events.

'I think he said only an idiot ignores well-intentioned advice,' responded Sam.

'I ain't no idiot!' Elrod fumed. 'Tell him to take that back.'

'A tribal delegation petitioned your company not to place the gas rig in the middle of the mango plantation,' said Martin Kincofu.

'Aw hell, they were just a few scrawny trees,' said Elrod. 'Who's gonna miss them?'

'You've chopped down the mango trees?' said Sam in astonishment. 'Why didn't you build the well to one side of the plantation?'

'It was the optimal location for the pad,' explained Crawford. 'It will maximise the underground pipeline configuration and increase yield by three per cent.'

The old chief let out a toothless cackle. His spittle covered Elrod's notepad. *'Njovu adzakhala okwija,'* he said.

'What did he say?' demanded Crawford. Sweat broke from his forehead.

'The chief said the elephants will be angry. I suspect that's an understatement, Mr Crawford.'

'Who cares what those dumb critters think?' replied Elrod.

'Each of those elephants has the strength of an eight-tonne bulldozer. The old matriarch is the equivalent of a twelve-tonne 'dozer and the gas rig is in the exact spot where their mango trees used to be. This may not end well,' Sam replied.

The sound of distant, enraged trumpeting wafted through the open windows. Moments later, the noise of banging, clattering and twisting of tortured metal intruded on the guests of the Luangwa lodge.

'Aw shit,' muttered Elrod. He and Crawford pushed back their chairs and sprinted out of the conference room towards the demolition taking place five hundred metres away in the bush.

Sam waited while Chief Kincofu conferred with his son. Sam tried to follow the Ngoma conversation, but gave up after the first few sentences. Eventually Martin Kincofu leaned forward in his chair. 'My father wants to know why a man who has such an affection for the wildlife of this area fights so hard for the profits of an oil company?'

'Because I believe the technology is safe if no shortcuts are taken.'

'Such as mixing the well casing cement with an inferior and out-of-date local product?'

Sam looked guilty. 'Elrod will be replaced by a proper engineer.'

'And what about the water? The Luangwa River cannot support the huge quantities required to frack eighty wells.'

'Fracking will stop in the dry season. You have my word.'

'But what about the disruption to the animals?'

A mighty crash sounded in the distance as the enraged elephants toppled the gas rig.

'Chuck Crawford spoke the truth when he said the Luangwa Shale will bring prosperity to your people. If your father permits you to sign that document, then he will become a wealthy man. Never again will the son of an Ngoma chief leave home in rags and tend to the garden of a total stranger to pay his way through law school.'

'I see you have done your homework,' Martin Kincofu replied. He looked embarrassed that Sam had found out how far his family had fallen.

'I can lessen the disruption of the trucks and the drilling by imposing the most stringent operational procedures ever seen in the fracking industry. Tourism and drilling can co-exist in harmony and the profits can be channelled into wildlife protection schemes.'

'Let me talk to my father.' Martin turned to his right and began a long, animated discussion with the chief. Several times he heard the word '*kukhulupirira*' uttered by the old chief.

'Chief Kincofu says he can trust you. You are a man of your word and if you say the well is safe, then it must be so.'

Sam felt the exhilaration of a successful negotiation. He had extracted enormous concessions from Rex Daingerfield to seal the deal with Kincofu and he was confident he could meet all the promises he had made. And yet a strange feeling of guilt troubled his conscience. As Martin Kincofu pulled the drilling permit from his briefcase and pulled the lid off a cheap pen, Sam experienced the chilling realisation he was no better than Dan Elrod.

'And you, Martin. What do you think?' Sam asked.

'I know everything you have said is true and yet I fear the demand for water from the river is unsustainable. A part of me feels uneasy.'

'I believe there is a traditional Zambian proverb that says when you are in two minds, you should follow the advice of your heart.'

Sam waited while Martin Kincofu translated the conversation to his father. The chief looked at Sam and chuckled.

‘Let me know when your heart has spoken,’ Sam said. He then tore the unsigned drilling permit into tiny fragments, picked up his jacket from his chair, and threw the paper fragments into the waste-paper basket as he made his way to the conference room door.

‘Please take as much time as you need to come to the right decision, gentlemen. You have my details if you decide to proceed.’

END OF THIS SAMPLE

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